

The Problem Solving Model Explained

Corrections Officers Academy

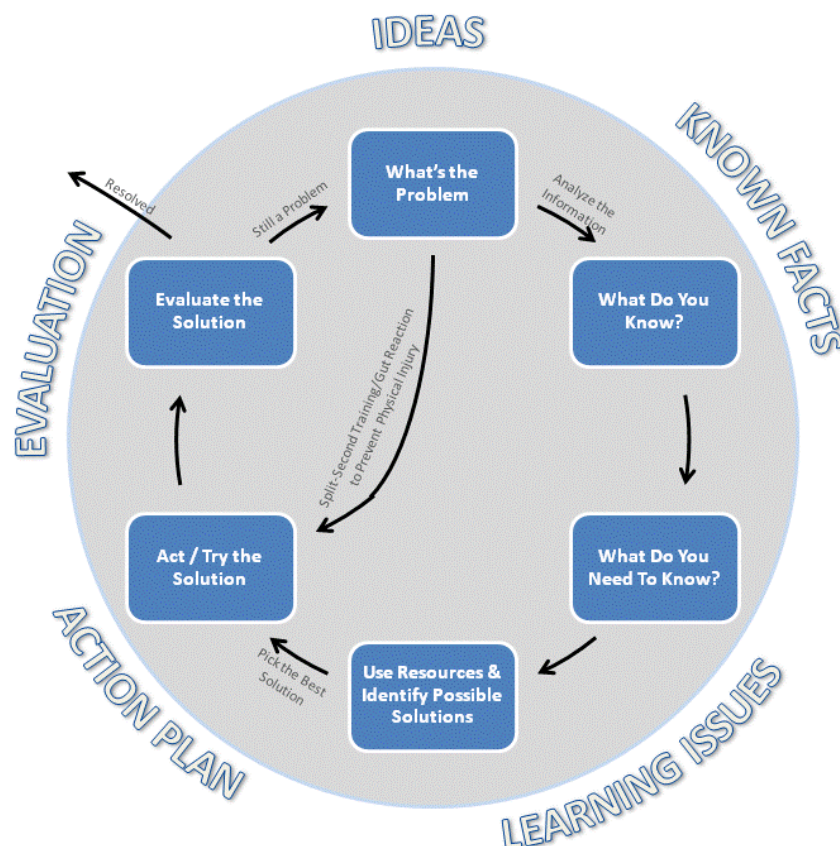


Problem Solving and adult learning go hand in hand. When students are presented with complex, ill-structured, realistic problems, they work through those problems using some kind of thinking process. Students come to the Corrections Officers Academy with diverse backgrounds and varied levels of work experience.

Some of the new academy students only recently finished school, and some have worked many jobs in the private sector. Some students are coming from highly technical industries, while others are coming straight from active-duty military service. This academy curriculum takes advantage of student's varying levels of real-world experience. Every student brings their own ideas, habits, and systems for solving problems.

To assist in group work and learning, this standard **Problem Solving Model** will be used. Every time an ill-structured problem is presented, the class will be expected to work through the problem using this process. The long-term goal is that students will continue to solve problems using this same process after they graduate and continue on with their careers.

This Problem Solving Model is a circular process that “goes round and round” until the problem is resolved. This process can be utilized by a single problem solver, or by a team. There are six main steps in the model:



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1. **What's the Problem?**

What are the first thoughts about the nature of the situation? This step is where you identify the scope of the problem. In group work, this step helps all the problem solvers get on the same page.

2. **What do You Know?**

What are the facts? Every problem solver brings experience and knowledge to the table. In this step, a group can brainstorm and share knowledge to further define the problem. These facts come from two sources:

- a. ***Facts presented by the situation itself*** (time of day, location of incident, statements made by involved parties, etc.)
- b. ***Facts already known by YOU*** (your knowledge of laws & policies, your understanding of human nature, your experience dealing with similar incidents in the past, etc.)

3. **What do You Need to Know?**

Are there missing pieces of information? What do we need to investigate as we move forward? This step is crucial to good problem solving. People often attempt to "solve" the problem based only on what they know at that moment. They don't seek out new info and skills that are available to them. Problem solvers should always be aware that they may not have all the available information or skills or expertise to handle every problem. By realizing what is missing, a problem solver "makes a shopping list" of info, skills, and expertise. Is there something you'd like to look up before you decide on your "final answer"?

4. **Use Resources and Identify Possible Solutions**

When time is available, problem solvers take their list and "go shopping" for those missing pieces of info and skills. They research. They coordinate with agencies outside of the department. They take initiative and learn self-reliance. A problem solver should say, *"How can I figure this out?"* instead of *"Tell me what to do."*

5. **Act / Try the Solution**

Now the problem solver or team puts their best option into action. We stress ethics and decision making throughout our academy curriculum. The action must meet four key criteria: it must be A) reasonable, B) legal/necessary, C) ethical, and D) within department policy.

6. **Evaluate the Solution**

Did it work? Do we need to try it again, or try something different? Is the original problem still present? Is there another problem now? If the problem persists, we start back at Step #1 and begin the circular process again.

One very unique component of this Problem Solving Model is the recognition that some "problems" encountered by criminal justice professionals require immediate action to prevent physical harm to the officer or others. For this model and process to be accurate, we had to acknowledge that in some emergencies, officers must make quick judgments based on training and/or instinctual impulse to quickly address a threat. In our circular diagram we have added a direct route from Step #1 [What's the Problem?] to #5 [Act].

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This direct route is only used when there is zero time to work through the intermediate steps. However, if this direct route is employed, it automatically means continuing around the full cycle once the immediate threat has been neutralized. In other words, if the direct route is used, you're not done – not even close. After addressing the immediate threat and evaluating, the problem solver will start over at Step #1 and begin to work the process again.

Examples of situations where this direct route would be employed are:

- A suspect spins around and reaches for your firearm while you are conducting a search.
- A fellow officer is being attacked by an inmate and is calling for help.
- While on a transport, you see that a vehicle has stalled on the train tracks with a train coming.

These examples are “problems” that initially do not lend themselves to the full cycle. They require immediate action. Once the situation is stabilized, the problem solver can reset and move into the 6-step process.

At the WSCJTC, we felt very strongly that for this Problem Solving Model to resonate with students and staff, it had to be specific to criminal justice work and absolutely accurate. The model must be able to handle complex, evolving, ill-structured problems – but also be able to handle split-second problems as well. This Problem Solving Model is based upon existing principles found in problem-based learning curriculums from various industries. We have simply translated these ideas into clear and understandable terms to make them accessible for our academy program.

Deputy Seth Grant, King County Sheriff's Office

Curriculum Designer

WSCJTC Development, Training, & Standards